Dude, Wake Up!

By LCdr. Ed Burns

We were scheduled for a double-cycle flight in the mighty Hawkeye on another routine day at sea. We briefed as red-air control for an air-defense, war-at-sea exercise on our first cycle and blue-air control of a 4 v 2 on our second cycle. The P-CICO (mission commander under instruction) sat in center seat, with two senior-instructor CICOs flanking him. The WASEX for the red air was successful because they attacked the CVN before being engaged by blue CAP. Hurray for the red guys!

Second-cycle strikers flew front-end tanking, which gave us extra dead time between events. We used the time to debrief items from the WASEX; all five of us were involved in the discussion.

Red and blue air checked in for our second event on the prebriefed have-quick control net, and red air passed a target area PIREP. I was busy working the data link, and the other I-CICO controlled the self-escort strike (SES).

Blue air was having a hard time hearing red air on the safety-of-flight, have-quick net. With COMEX in one minute, the blue lead sent a new TOD to resynch everyone and gave a long five count before sending it. I had expected the P-CICO (who owns all the mission radios during a flight) to toggle the TOD-receive switch. At the two count, the P-CICO hadn't moved. I was listening to the same radios as the P-CICO and knew he wasn't talking to anyone. I was concerned the P-CICO would not hit the TOD-receive switch in time, so I reached over and toggled receive. I was agitated to why the P-CICO didn't position the switch; then I looked at him, and saw his eyes were closed.

I grabbed his helmet and shook him awake. His eyes popped open, his body flinched, and his right hand moved upward to hit the TOD-receive switch—which I blocked. I told him we already had a good TOD, and the SES had started. For the next 30 seconds, he incoherently talked about the PIREP that red air had passed. Both I-CICOs told him not to worry about the PIREP; we pressed on, controlling the strike.

We weren't ready for this one aspect of risk. Because it was our only flight of the day, no out-of-the-ordinary tasking for the P-CICO's ground job should have affected him. The likelihood of someone falling asleep, or its impact, never crossed our minds. We learned several factors during the debrief that contributed to his falling asleep: He did not drink water during a 3.5-hour, double-cycle flight, and he never admitted at the brief he was tired.

Our air-wing flight surgeon recommends the following strategies to keep you alert during long or frequent flights when there is little time to rest:

- Drink water—dehydration decreases your ability to think.
- Breathe 100-percent oxygen (applies to aircraft that lack ejection seats).
- Get up and walk around to get the blood flowing (only works for big airplanes).
- Eat something; your blood sugar may be low.
- Take a combat nap, but let the crew know you need a five-minute break.

- Avoid workouts just before flying.

A combination of dehydration and exhaustion cuts your cognitive abilities in half.

From a Hawkeye view:

- Take breaks between cycles, when the tasking is light, but communicate your intentions to the crew.
- Temporarily assign individual mission duties to other crew members while away from your crew position or combat napping.
- If you're too tired to fly, cry uncle. A well-rested replacement JO almost always can be found.
- If you nod off during the most stressful part of a mission, you have become a detriment to the mission. It's too late for an alert crew member to assume an increased workload when someone unexpectedly nods off.

LCdr. Burns flies with VAW-126.

This is a good CRM example of what not to do. All seven elements of the familiar SADCLAM skills were not executed. Fortunately, this incident was published here and not on the message board as a mishap. –Cdr. Darryl Barrickman, E-2C analyst, Naval Safety Center.